

INSTITUTE OF CURRENT WORLD AFFAIRS

JEF-8

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Bangkok 9, Thailand
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The Problem of Equality - Continued

Mr. Richard H. Nolte
Institute of Current World Affairs
535 Fifth Avenue
New York, New York

Dear Mr. Nolte:

Last month we looked at what happened to the surplus in traditional Thai society, and we learned that the cultivators traded it to their rulers. We also learned that there was nothing divine about the system; it was a matter of choice, and what the rulers had to trade in return was what they had given themselves by means of their agreements to cooperate with one another and to prevent others (the cultivators) from cooperating against them. Nevertheless the rulers had a special place in the system of religious belief which they supported and perpetuated, and I thought it might be useful to start out by considering this month the king's own perception of the purposes of his, and everyone else's, actions. We can then go on to look at the consequences of their actions, in full awareness of the evanescence of "purposes."

The King's Understanding of the System

According to the views propagated by the Thai monarchy, the "purpose" of Thai society was to glorify and support the Buddhist Church; that is, the surplus of society was dedicated to this end. As a means to this end, Thai society itself had to be protected; hence the king had to be supported, since he led the efforts to protect the society and to support the faith. The anthropologist Akin writes as follows in interpreting a Royal Decree of 1785:

"Giving protection to the people was considered to be one of the most important attributes of the king's role. It was because he was protecting them that he could demand their services. In regard to the phrai avoiding corvee at the time of building the city, King Rama I made the following statement. According to the custom of the land, the monks, the Brahmans, and the people could live in peace because of the power and merit of the king. The king acceded to the throne to protect the people and the kingdom from the enemies who wanted to injure and destroy them. When the kingdom was protected, the Buddhist religion prospered and the people could worship freely. This was because of the protection afforded by the king. Thus the king had done a great deal for all kinds of living creatures of the world. The people should be loyal to him, and be willing to use their strength in doing work for him as an expression of their gratitude."

Wales quotes an edict from the year 1810, the first year of the reign of King Rama II, which expresses many of the same points:

"It has been the custom of kings from old time to preserve the Buddhist religion and to further its prosperity. The way of doing this was by keeping cohorts of good soldiers to form an army, and by the accumulation of weapons, with the royal power at the head. Thereby he vanquished all his enemies in warfare, and he prevented the

Jeffrey Race is an Institute Fellow investigating how the institutions of the past influence how people behave toward one another today. His current area of study is Southeast Asia.

Buddhist religion from being endangered by the enemy, as kings have always done. . . . Now the present king has been enthroned only recently, and has made up his mind to protect the people and the religion from the danger of enemies both external and internal."

Significantly, the decree then goes on to the logical conclusion of this resolve: "And so he has given orders for a new registration to be carried out." That is, a new and more vigorous effort was to be made to track down all those who had been evading labor obligations for the king.

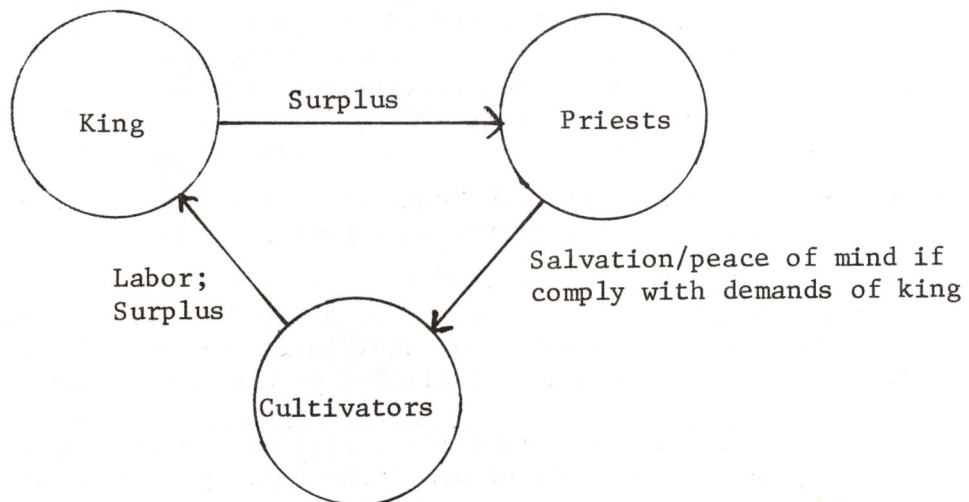
We should note in passing (we will return to the subject later, when we begin to scrutinize modern societies) that these two justifications for appropriation of the surplus -- protection of the people and protection of "national values" (in this case Buddhism) -- are the identical ones used by modern states to justify their extensive powers of command and appropriation.

We should also note that the ideology justifies the rewards only to the king -- not to the nobility, except insofar as they are means to the king's ends. In fact, as coming pages will show, the nobility was partly replaced when better and cheaper ways were found to perform their jobs of command and appropriation.

Consequences as Opposed to Purposes

In the belief system perpetuated by the ruler, religion was an end in itself to be supported by the Thai people, in part by direct contributions of their surplus, and in part through the agency of the king. One qualification to this understanding of religion as an end in itself was perhaps the folk belief that prosperity of the religious establishment brought prosperity to the kingdom; on a more direct basis, benefactions by believers brought rewards both in this life and the next.

We can go behind these subjective beliefs, however, to see what the consequences of the beliefs were. In JEF-7 we spent some time going into the values which made the system function smoothly. One of the major institutions which perpetuated these values was the Buddhist Church: through its temple schools, through its sermons, through the prestige of the monkhood as the bearer of the holy message of Buddha. If we are correct in our judgment that the inculcation of these beliefs in the cultivators made it easier for the king to extract the surplus, then we get an exchange flow something like the following:



This is quite similar in its workings to one leg of the four-cornered exchange diagram in JEF-6. Each exchanges something relatively less valued to himself for something more valued; each has an incentive to continue the relationship for this reason, at least in preference to terminating it entirely. That is why, assuming these endowments of resources and beliefs (including especially the cultivators' beliefs in the next world), the system is rarely viewed as one of "exploitation" by those who produce the surplus. They get value received in the religious exchange system, just as they do (as we showed in JEF-7) in the secular exchange system with the nobility. It is of course quite possible that the cultivators would like to get the services of each more cheaply, i.e. get better terms of trade; we will address shortly why they cannot. Speaking just to structure, and leaving aside the terms of trade, it is important to note that the cultivators have the beliefs they do because of the large investment made by the king in propagating them; similarly the king and the nobility have the special resources they do because of their own agreements to cooperate with one another.

The Thai kings probably never understood their own behavior in these terms. At least, they probably never understood explicitly the instrumental consequences of their lavish support of the Buddhist faith. It is unlikely, though, that they were oblivious to the virtues of Buddhism in making pliable subjects out of their people; they perhaps simply felt this to be a pleasant side benefit of their real purpose. Scientifically, there is no way to show otherwise.

It may be helpful here to note some of the differences between the Buddhist Church in Thailand and the various Christian Churches in Europe, at least insofar as the differences influenced inequality. In general, we can say that the Buddhist Church lacked autonomy in various ways -- and we know now that autonomy is a crucial property in determining whether an organization can bring its weight to bear. This lack of autonomy was both structural and doctrinal.

First, we can observe that the Church lacked autonomy from the Thai rulers, since it was penetrated and under the jurisdiction of the secular power in numerous specific ways that the Christian Churches were not. Second, the king himself was believed to have his own magical powers and his own lines of communication to the next world, hence damaging the monopoly position of the priesthood. Third, the Buddhist Church was not autonomous of the cultivators either, due to the doctrinal belief in the necessity for each male member of the faith to spend three months as a monk. Finally, the notion that there is a power above the king, to which the king is accountable through the Church, has never been prominent in Buddhist doctrine. It is true that there is an ideal of the "universal monarch" following the ten kingly virtues, but this trend of thought has generally been submerged, and in any event retribution for failure to follow the ten kingly virtues will not be visited on the sinning monarch by the Church -- nor will judgment even. So far as I can see, there is no doctrinal basis for resistance to unjust or criminal rule. This is in contrast to the Christian doctrine (going back to the precedents of the Jewish prophets) that the Church may bless the state, but it has the discretion to condemn as well. Such a doctrine of this-worldly religious rationalism does not find a home in Buddhism, as far as I can see; if the blessing is to be withdrawn from the ruler, it will be done by the supernatural acting in its own inscrutable way; and the judgment will be manifest only with the fall of the ruler, or his being stricken with some disease or other sign.

Two important consequences follow from these facts. First, the Buddhist Church

has never in Thailand had the same tendency to become a focus of opposition to secular elites. (In fact the only case I can think of where the Buddhist Church has done so in Asia has been in Vietnam in the mid-1960's.) Second, the Buddhist Church has not itself come to occupy the clearly extractive role vis-a-vis the cultivators that some branches of the European Christian Churches have (or at least did) - due, I think, to this circulation in and out by the secular masses. As a result less discretion over the surplus has been in the hands of the religious leaders in Thailand, compared to Europe, while at the same time the Church has been a more effective, and a more reliable, instrument of the state in extracting the surplus. This I think goes a long way toward accounting for Bowring's observation about the absoluteness of submission in Thailand.

The Protection System

We have seen that, from a distributive point of view, there was more to the "support of religion" rationale than the participants probably understood. What about the other half of the ideological rationalization of the system: protecting the people? What does this argument amount to?

In part protection meant tracking down, apprehending, and bringing to justice the occasional burglar and murderer in the Thai countryside, but we know from JEF-6 that the stiff social controls on deviance in small isolated communities meant that this was never a severe threat. The most important threat was from outsiders, invading to enslave Thai cultivators, i.e., to appropriate their surplus on behalf of another state.

Who were these outsiders? At first glance they were the Mons, the Burmese, the Cambodians, and the Vietnamese -- these were at any rate the terms in which the Thai rulers presented the argument, and in which the subjects accepted it. But we know from the way these societies operated that booty and slaves acquired in war accrued to the elites among the invaders, just as in cases where the Thai rulers used their subjects' manpower to go on raiding expeditions into neighboring kingdoms. Thus the ideological rationalization of protection translates as follows in real distributive terms: the Thai king organized the protection of his subjects with the explicit purpose in mind of preventing their rice crops, their animals, their labor, from being turned to the account of foreigners (foreign elites). The subjects also understood it this way, though they did not make the distinction between subjects and rulers when thinking of whose hands they would fall into. The consequence of preventing the subjects' surplus from falling into the hands of foreign elites was that it continued, as we know, to fall into the hands of the Thai elites.

What is even more brilliant about this argument is that its mirror image was used by rulers in all the adjoining states to justify their extracting the surplus from their own cultivators. Thus for example the Burmese kings argued the necessity of transferring to themselves the surplus of their Burmese cultivators on the grounds that this compensated them for their leadership which prevented these same cultivators from being compelled to labor for the Thai rulers. The Thai rulers made the same argument to their own people vis-a-vis the Burmese; the Mon leaders to their people; the Khmers to theirs, etc. This argument, as can be seen, is so outrageously clever that the first ruler to think of it must certainly have been a genius. It is obvious, however, that there is more to the argument than simply being protected from having one's surplus taken by foreigners - for the amount of surplus taken was roughly the same in all these states (i.e., all of it). The cultivators may also have been thinking of ethnic solidarity, avoiding an unpleasant move to a new area, or some other factors which tipped the balance in favor their own rulers.

So much for the structure of the system. What of the terms of trade, i.e. the "price" which the purchasers of the protection service had to pay? According to the rationale, it was the rulers who provided the protection and hence deserved the large rewards. How was this protection in fact carried out (forgetting for the moment all the observations we have just made about the real-world distributive consequences of this service)? It is plain that the king did not go out to patrol the streets himself at night, not did he and the nobles go to engage the Burmese, the Mons, the Khmers, and the Vietnamese in place of the people receiving the protection. On the contrary, they hired others to do these things at subsistence wages or their non-monetary equivalents. Hence we see that what was technically required for this protection service was large numbers of peoples at fixed wages, plus a certain number of people with status, and hence authority, who could organize and command the others.

If the flows to the king and the nobility had been of the character of wages paid for providing a service, then they would have been proportional to the quantity of services provided, a return for the extra element of authority added by the elites. But this was not at all the character of the flows to the king and nobility. Their "compensation," as the ideology indicates, was not in proportion to the effort expended; it was a residual of the total surplus extracted less the amount expended to hire the labor at subsistence rates. Since the return was a residual after fixed costs, its level was set completely by the rate at which surplus was collected. We have discussed above how this rate was set; hence we now know how the rate of "compensation" for "protection" was set. We see that as with "support of religion" there was a vast difference between the rationale and the actual consequences.

In this connection we should note here (it will be developed in more detail later) the the identity of who gets this residual gradually shifts as societies develop. In Thai society in the feudal period, it was the king and the nobility, hiring soldiers at subsistence rates. Later, the king hired not just the soldiers but also their officers at fixed wages (shift to a bureaucratic structure), hence keeping all the residual for himself. Finally the king himself was put on a fixed salary. What happened to the residual at this point is not immediately clear, but it should be an interesting point to pursue when we get to studying that stage.

It would be wrong to look down on Thai cultivators as simpletons, lacking in analytical sophistication, for being taken in by the rationale of "protection" for so many centuries. The truth of the matter is that this same argument successfully fooled not just Thai cultivators but generations of Western anthropologists, sociologists, and political scientists who right up to the present moment continue to explain and justify the appropriation of surplus by elites as "compensation for protection." Any standard textbook repeats this line, not just repeating a rather self-serving line of argument but also totally misleading the reader about the actual structure of the process.

Control Mechanisms

The great inequalities successfully produced at any one moment by the structure and values of Thai society naturally made an upward shift in one's position very attractive. Hence the great problem for the people at the top was how to make the system of upward wealth transfers stable. The usefulness toward this end of the religious and cultural values described earlier is plain; consequently enormous resources were devoted to socializing community members into these values. Nevertheless

the rewards for upward movement were so enormous that beliefs alone were insufficient to keep people "in their places." Special control mechanisms were necessary.

We know from JEF-6 and JEF-7 that it was the cooperation of certain individuals, in autonomy from others (and only rarely relying on violence), that brought about the successful transfer of resources from those with less to those with more. Yet cooperation implies communication; consequently many of the special control mechanisms employed inhibited communications of various types and in various ways in order to attain their ultimate goal. Here we see another case where common beliefs are mistaken: it is usually assumed that as societies progress from primitive to modern, internal communications improve. This is a half-truth at best. We know that what prevented inequality in hunting and gathering societies was precisely the completeness of internal communications; their deterioration led to autonomy and inequality. Relying on this phenomenon but consciously turning it to their ends, leaders of traditional Thai society sought to have differentiated communications patterns, in at least three ways: 1. they sought to achieve a correlation between ease and degree of communications and social rank - the higher the rank, the easier and more complete were communications; 2. they sought to have communications move vertically more easily than horizontally; 3. they sought to inhibit the communication of certain kinds of messages completely.

I have not yet uncovered all the control mechanisms, but quite a number were apparent in going through the readings on Thai history. Let me divide them into two kinds: those on elites by the king, and those by the king and elites on the lower subjects. Elite control mechanisms were exemplified by the following:

1. The norm of spying and mutual suspicion. Wales quotes La Loubere on this point, saying that the trade of informer "is commanded to every person at Siam, under pain of death for the least things; and so whatever is known by two Witnesses, is almost infallibly related to the King. . . ."

2. The yokkrabat. A special official sent by the king to serve as chief judge in each province, the yokkrabat was charged with reporting to the king independently of the regular bureaucratic chain, so as to keep the province governor in check and prevent combinations of local officials against the king.

3. Private communications forbidden. Akin notes that "at least during certain periods, there were laws in effect forbidding high ranking officials to have private contact with each other. Capital punishment was prescribed for officials [above a certain rank] who went to see each other at their abodes or talked to each other in secret."

4. A change after 1569 from territorial to manpower control for the nobility. Up through the first fall of Ayutthaya in 1569, princes and nobles were sent to rule towns and all their inhabitants; the system worked well as long as it was expanding and successfully gathering spoils from its neighbors; in case of difficulties, however it was easy for the elites to split off and turn on the Thai king, for they commanded an entire territorial and manpower unit, colocated with them. After the successful Burmese attack on Ayutthaya in 1569, when this phenomenon of dissolution and disloyalty was prominent, the kings slowly changed the structure by moving the princes into the capital from the provinces, replacing them with governors, and putting the princes in charge of phrai scattered throughout the kingdom, a sort of functional organization cutting across a separately organized territorial one. As Wales describes it: "the nature of the feudal system was changed from one of which the basis was territorial . . . to one of which the basis was personal . . . By allowing the [phrai] to choose his

lord or patron, the power of the latter was weakened because, instead of drawing his men from one well-defined area of land which was his fief, they were, within the limits of the territories immediately surrounding the capital, widely scattered and were also permitted to change their habitat."

5. Kinship rules. Inheritance was in equal shares, and there was no corporate family.

The fourth control mechanism seems to have been the keystone in the arch, for before its adoption the combination of the other communication control mechanisms and the special value placed on the king in religion was still insufficient to ensure stability. Speaking of the Early Ayuthaya period, Akin writes: "Yet even with such an aura surrounding him, it appears that only a strong king could rule in peace. Numerous succession disputes and dethronements of reigning weak kings testify to this conclusion. . . . At the death of a reigning monarch, the princes who governed important towns moved their troops to Ayuthaya to fight among themselves for the throne, or to put to death a weak successor, often their own nephew or cousin."

We noted above that the cultivators wanted to get the services of the king and of religion more cheaply (though they were convinced of their value), but that they could not. It was the control mechanisms on the cultivators by the elites, analogous to the ones on the elites themselves by the king, that prevented the cultivators from getting better prices in their exchange relationships. The control mechanisms were designed to ensure that the cultivators had no basis for bargaining, i.e. no way to bring pressure on their superiors. Thus, the superiors had virtually complete autonomy. Some of these control mechanisms were:

1. Assembly of the cultivators apparently forbidden. Wales quotes an order from King Day Srah, dated 1727, to his provincial governors. "If [the governor] sees signs of the people assembling and combining together he must find out the cause of it."

2. No local self-government. Even the heads of villages were chosen by the provincial governor.

3. All must be registered. As early as 1356 it was required for phrai to be registered for labor, and by the time of Ayuthaya it was required that all phrai be tattooed. (To anticipate our account a bit, it is interesting to record the modern counterparts of these control mechanisms: all Thai must be registered with the police and must present the "family book" register for all kinds of transactions; they must also carry an identification card under penalty of a fine; and students must wear uniforms with a special identifying number plainly embroidered over the breast.)

4. Movement was controlled. A phrai could not move without the permission of his nai.

Thai history furnishes us with an extremely useful control group to infer the effectiveness of these special mechanisms for limiting the returns to the Thai cultivators - the Chinese. For reasons which we will examine later, the Thai kings encouraged the immigration of Chinese, and the latter were not placed under two important constraints under which Thai lived: the corvee and the restrictions on movement. As a result, financial assets began to accumulate in the hands of the Chinese community, until today they are overwhelmingly powerful in the economic sector. As Akin explains: "With restriction on their movement and the demand on their labor by the government as well as their nai, it was difficult for a phrai to accumulate wealth. . . . Thus the field for [wage labor and trade] was left open to the Chinese immigrants who were

exempted from corvee and were not obligated to be registered under a nai." That is, the system was designed so that Thai members who were not nobility would be unable to accumulate any surplus, the latter being entirely transferred, as we know, to the king and the nobles. The Chinese immigrants (most coming with only their shirts) operated outside of several of the rules which transferred surplus from the Thai and hence were able to accumulate the large investible capital which is presently in the hands of the Chinese community.

An observer might be tempted to ask why the exchange diagram shown on page 7 of the last letter, in which the cultivators traded their surplus for protection, was able to work. Why didn't the cultivators "put pressure" on the nobility and the king to redistribute the surplus, much as in the exchange diagram shown on page 3 of JEF-6, where those with less threaten those with more? I think the above observations on control mechanisms are part of the answer - though only part, since we have noted also the significant role of religious and cultural beliefs. Now to anticipate ourselves a bit once more, it is a curious thing that modern systems of transferring wealth from poor to rich are able, successfully, to dispense with all of these rather clumsy control mechanisms, even while religious indoctrination is declining in importance and effectiveness. So something else quite powerful, and apparently rather obscure, has certainly taken their place. If only for this reason I have thought it important to explain how the traditional control mechanisms worked, so we can know what it is we are seeking in modern societies -- something that accomplishes the same end, but more effectively.

In the next letter I shall have more to say about the real meaning of autonomy in traditional Thai society, and I shall continue with the themes mentioned at the end of JEF-7: why the system persisted, and how and why it changed. The latter in particular will give us a clue as to what are the inexorable forces pushing us -- everyone -- into the modern world.

Sincerely,



Jeffrey Race

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